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HERO

ILLUS



SPUNK CONFIDENTIAL

BY JOE FUKU

**RENEGADE
ANIMATOR
JOHN
KRICFALUSI
COMES TO
COMICS AND
EXPLAINS WHY
YOU SHOULD
HOLLER YOUR
NAME WHEN
ENTERING A
RESTAURANT**



After an ugly (and well-detailed) incident with Nickelodeon, John Kricfalusi found himself leaving his babies, Ren & Stimpy, in the hands of the cable network. The network proceeded to put together a Ren &

Stimpie show which, according to nearly everyone not involved, stunk like a fish in a laundry hamper.

In a way, this has been something of a blessing for Kricfalusi. First of all, it proved once and for all that he was

a large—probably the largest—part of the show's success. It also opened the door for a lot more offers, including one from Marvel to develop some of his characters into their own comic book line.

Rejoice or cringe in terror, America! John Kricfalusi is back!!

Does the criteria for a good cartoon also make for a good comic book? How is it the same? How is it different?

It's a little early even to articulate. First of all, it doesn't have sound. We relied a lot on sound. We relied a lot on time. A cartoon is happening in

real time. There's nothing you can do about it when a cartoon is happening. You just have to witness it. In a comic book, you can look back. You can spend a lot of time on a page. You can go from one panel to another. In one way there are a lot of handicaps, considering all the tools available to an artist in animation. Another advantage to comic books is you can do more detailed drawings. I know there are more advantages, but it's still just a little too early to say.

Did you start developing stories that seemed better suited to comics? Was it something you'd always wanted to do?

Actually Mort Todd (editor at Marvel) decided it. He just called us up. We actually had been getting calls from Marvel and DC, but Mort was really in tune with the kind of thing we wanted to do, whether it was comic books or cartoons.

What do you mean by being in tune? He was going to give you free reign?

He was definitely into that. He was the editor of *Cracked Magazine* and he was always yelling at his cartoonists to be more inventive, more free. So we kind of hit it off right away. He called up and said, "Do you want to do a comic? Just a Spumco comic? ... Anything you want." I said, "Yeah, but you know what? Let's do it like an old comic. Let's do it with pulpy paper.

Let's not make a graphic novel. Let's not try to pretend it's something that it isn't. In fact, let's call it *Comic Book*." And I said, "Let's make it bigger, 9x12, instead of whatever it is." And he was totally into it, and so was his publisher, Mike Hobson.

Were you a fan of comic books as a kid? Is that what led you toward what you're doing now?

Definitely, it had a huge influence. All the time, I had tons of comics and my dad used to go crazy. He would throw them out all the time.

What were your favorite titles?

It depends on which age I was, I guess. When I was a little kid I loved mostly the funny comics.

Like the crazy old Jimmy Olsen stories or...

Those weren't meant to be funny. Those *were* funny, but they weren't meant to be. No, like Harvey Comics ... *Spooky* and *Hot Stuff*. I loved their "little girl" comics. I was in love with Little Dot. To call those funny comics is kind of reaching. By tradition they are called funny comics, and funny comics traditionally haven't really been funny. It's pretty weird. But you'd



buy them for the drawings. I just loved the drawings in certain books. I liked the Hanna-Barbera comics because I liked the Hanna-Barbera cartoons.

Did you think that the comics lived up to the cartoons?

No, there's a law in licensed comic books that if you take a cartoon character that is already well established in an animated cartoon, the stories have to have nothing to do with the way the characters act in the animated cartoons. It seems like an unwritten law. You read *Bugs Bunny* comics, and Bugs Bunny wouldn't be anything like he was in the cartoons. The Road Runner ... the Road Runner was a girl with three kids, and she talked in the comics. You never saw that in the cartoons. It was kind of cool. I don't know who invented this

rule, but it's very traditional. Andy Panda had a chicken friend that he used to hang around with. I don't remember ever seeing him with his Charlie Chicken. In fact, because of this long-standing tradition, we decided to do some stories in our comic book where our characters have nothing to do with what they're supposed to be.

Are you going to take your characters in a different direction than you did in the animated episodes?

Yes. Some of the stories are going to be in the "funny animal" comic book tradition. For example, Jimmy the Retarded Boy, our star character. In the animated cartoon he is basically just an idiot ... a complete idiot. He hurts



himself a lot. Basically the humor comes out of the fact that he is just a moron. But in some of our comics, some of the shorter stories, Jimmy's not going to be an idiot ... he's going to be a chicken.

A chicken?!?!?

Yeah, he's going to be a chicken. He's got a best friend named Billy Chicken and they live in a chicken coop and he'll be a chicken's size. He looks exactly the same as Jimmy, but he's chicken-sized. [Jimmy]'s the same size as Billy Chicken. Billy and Jimmy are always in wacky adventures and they're always being chased by Wally Man. [Wally's] a big bald human with a hoe who chases after them all the time. At first, we probably won't be very good at it. But what I meant earlier when I said creating comics is easier than animation is that there are just not as many hands ... they don't take as long for one thing ... there [aren't] as many people messing with it.

You don't have to run through as many censors. Have you found that the censorship is more lax in comics than in cartoons?

Well, we haven't handed one in yet, but I don't think that there are going to be any problems. We're all in tune. We're all comic book heads. We all grew up with the same comics. I mean Mike Hobson, the publisher, is a big comic book fan. He's in the business because he likes the business. In animated cartoons, most people who get into power don't like cartoons. They don't have the same background as the cartoonist. They've never read a comic book in their lives. They've never seen an animated cartoon before, unless it's *Scooby Doo* or something—or they had something to do with it. They don't like the medium. In comic books it seems to be different, so far. Everybody I've met in comic books is there because they like the medium, they grew up with it. It's a little different environment.

So you think that people probably

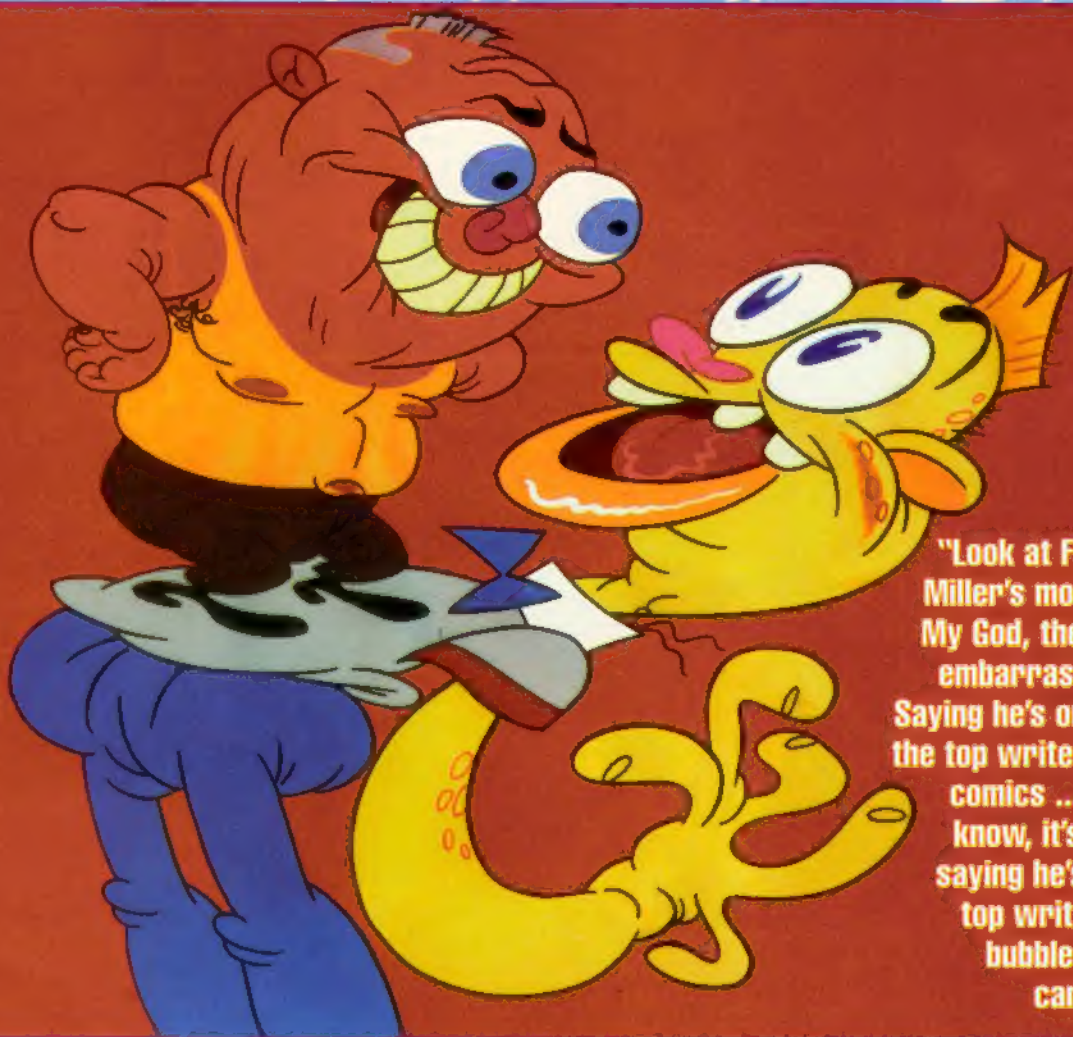
aren't as jaded in the comic book business?

Well, they're probably jaded. I'm sure the superhero thing has jaded a lot of people. In fact, I think that's why there's a lot of excitement about *Comic Book*, because it's *comic*. What's comic about huge muscley guys in long underwear beating the crap out of each other? I mean it is in a weird, twisted way, but it's not supposed to be. It's supposed to be really serious, which kind of kills me.

But at the same time, you seem to have a genuine affinity—or at least a satirical affinity—for superheroes. What about Powdered Toast Man and the Ripping Friends?

I was a big fan of Jack Kirby and the Marvel Comics of the '60s.

Are any of those characters, like Powdered Toast Man or the Ripping Friends, loosely based on any specific characters or did you



"Look at Frank Miller's movies. My God, they're embarrassing. Saying he's one of the top writers in comics ... you know, it's like saying he's the top writer in bubble gum cards."



go into restaurants now. It's cool that nobody's ever questioned it. I love cliches that people don't question. So we just said, "Powdered Toast Man has got to announce himself everywhere he goes."

So you're saying that what you found humorous in the old DC and the old Marvel was that a lot of the humour wasn't intended to be funny?

Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. The fact that people take superheroes seriously I find hilarious because it is such a ridiculous idea when you strip it down to "What is it?" It's a big muscley guy in leotards with balls bulging out. It's

recent Archie/Punisher crossover. Do you think any of your characters would ever cross over with the "serious" Marvel superheroes?

Well, I don't read any of them, so I don't know anything about what's going on. They seem to be way more serious now than they ever were. They always have gritted teeth and they're really angry at how poorly the American government runs the country or something. They're all taking the law into their own hands. Every one of them is right, too.

Do you have any particular goals with the comic besides telling an entertaining story?

Creatively it's just to amuse people. A practical goal is to get the characters recognized in another medium, a

just try to embody certain traits of the Kirby creations?

Not directly. I wouldn't say that we directly copied any particular character, but the attitudes ... a lot of the attitudes. There is a lot of DC and Marvel kind of combined. I know that those were two very different worlds, but in our case, there are funny parts about the Marvel Universe and funny parts about the DC Universe, and I combined them. Jim Smith and I basically combined them in the Rippling Friends and He-Hog and Powdered Toast Man. Powdered Toast Man also threw in Space Ghost and the TV superheroes which are, again, another genre. They don't act the same way as comic superheroes.

So Powdered Toast Man was a mix of a lot of different superheroes?

Yeah. The fact that he announces himself everywhere, he goes—"Powwwdered Toooooast Maaan!!!!!"—that came from *Space Ghost*. I love cliches. I love cliches where the origins are lost on human memory. Why the hell does anyone go around announcing himself everywhere he goes?! You go to your next comic convention and before you enter a room you should yell "Jooooe Fuuuuunnnk!" That's what I do when I



supposed to be an American ideal, superheroes are an American concept, but they're the most anti-American characters. They take

the law into their own hands ... The Punisher. Freedom isn't good enough. I'm going to take the law into my own hands. I'm the judge and jury. I punish you. I sentence you to your room without dinner. I love that name—"The Punisher." "Grounded! Take your pants down, little lad. Let me raise up a few welts on you."

You've heard about the

medium that's not as expensive to produce so that we can retain more control creatively. We want to be able to control the copyright, which is very hard when you sell to animated cartoons today. We want to retain the copyright. We also want to retain a lot of creative control over the animated cartoons. However, when you work with executives in Hollywood, they always want you to change your ideas because they don't get them personally.

We're praying that it's successful. If it is successful, then I can walk in and say, "It's already successful. People already like it. Maybe you shouldn't change it."

So the more of a history the characters have, the better chance you





have of keeping them true to their form?

Well, that's the theory. Let's hope that it works. Network executives are pretty hard to convince of anything. They just have their ways set. We're hoping that some reason might be able to seep into their thick, granite brains.

What comes first: is it the story, is it the art, is it the character? Is it the same for both mediums?

It's definitely the story. If you're talking about the sequence of the production of the medium, the story comes first. But the story could either be a plot premise, or it could be a concept premise, or it could be a character-motivated premise. You have to have your idea first before you start drawing. When I keep slamming cartoon writers, people automatically assume that I'm for bad writing. I'm not. I've been very careful and very clear in all my articles to say "No, I'm for good writing." I'm not for bad writers who don't understand the medium or writing [for] the medium—which is what happens in animated cartoons, which is what happens in most comic books. Where do comic book writers come from? Most of them, 90 percent of them, are comic book fans who don't

draw well enough to draw comics. Because what is the attraction to comics? The art, first. People don't care who wrote the Jack Kirby comics. If Stan Lee just wrote some comics and got some bum artist, I'd have never opened the comic. I don't think anybody would. Nobody reads comic books for the writing. You may get the odd fringe title or something, but the soul comes from the art and the stories should support the art.

What I'm saying is neither medium attracts good writers, unless they're artists who happen to be writers. The best writers of any medium have to understand the medium. A composer has to be a musician. If you can't read a note of music or play a musical instrument, you're not going to write a symphony, but in animated cartoons—and in many comic books—that is the case. The people who can't draw, who can't read and write drawings in the same sense of reading and writing music, are writing the drawings which is ridiculous.

Are there exceptions? Do you think that there are good writers that aren't good artists, or is it a general rule with you that

the best writers are the ones who can also draw?

It is theoretically possible that you could have a good writer who could assist the artist, much as you could have a lyricist work with a composer. The lyricist isn't writing the tunes and without a good tune it doesn't matter what the lyrics are. The thing is, it doesn't happen. It doesn't attract good writers. Good writers write novels. I mean that's all there is to it. I mean, why the hell would you want to write a comic book if you were a good writer? Are you really going to write about guys in long underwear running around beating the hell out of each other? What's the attraction to that? There's no writing in it! It's about vengeance. It's about vigilantism. It's about comic people. Where's the writing in it? I don't care who you are. Frank Miller... look at Frank Miller's movies. My God, they're embarrassing.

He's considered one of the top writers in comics.

Well, you know, it's like saying he's the top writer in bubble gum cards.

Do you still watch *Ren & Stimpy*? Have you seen any of the new episodes?

I've seen a few of them.

What do you think of them?

Just about what everyone else thinks.

That they've lost their soul?

Actually I'm surprised at the direction of *Ren & Stimpy*, because the one thing I thought they were going to do was tone it down. And they didn't tone it down. They took everything that Nickelodeon hated about our shows and they magnified it to the point of hideousness.

I'll tell you what the biggest problem



is. There's no context for the actions. It's a series of gross jokes without a story context, or a relationship context, and you get bored with them. For all the railing I do about how story isn't as important as art, I'm being disproven by watching the new *Ren & Stimpy*. I look at those and go, "These need story." As simple as our stories were, and as simple as good cartoon stories are, they're still stories. You have to have some kind of story in order to care about the characters. Now it's bloody. It's repulsive to look at, and there's no personality. Nobody has any personality. They keep using all our cameo characters, only they don't have the same personalities anymore. They're all psychotic maniacs.

Did you have a lot of stories left for *Ren & Stimpy*, or were you pretty much at the end of the creative curve with them?

No, no. We had a thousand stories left. In fact, they found some of them and are using them. You know a lot of the stories you see this year, though you would never know it—particularly since they took our credits off the front of the stories. A lot of the stories are our stories, but they directed the stories so poorly, they're not even directed. I mean, they're calling people directors who are not. They are not directors. They have absolutely no experience [at being] directors, and they're undirected stories. "Stimpy's Cartoon Show" was a show that Eleanor Blake and I wrote.

It's kind of pitiful. I just feel sorry for all these people. It's like they had a really good thing. People who are working on *Ren & Stimpy* now, it's like they can't let go of it. The thing is long dead. When it was popular, it was the best thing that ever happened to them because cartoonists had been oppressed in the animation industry for a long time. When this opportunity came for them to work directly for Nickelodeon, rather than the cartoonists who made the thing possible, who took all the risks, they couldn't let it go. It was too good. And they're hanging on even though it's lost its popularity and people are sick of it, they just can't let go. It's like a drug or something.

What are the general plans for Spumco?

Oh, we have everything in development but nothing sold at this point.

Could you give the *HERO* readers a few tidbits?

We're developing ... we're actually producing a Jimmy short right now called *Jimmy's Impossible Accidents*. Jimmy buggers himself up really hard. We want to sell that in movie theaters as a cartoon before the movie. We teamed George Liquor and Jimmy and discovered whole new story possibilities. When you have good characters you just generate all kinds of stories. I don't mean just a lot of stories, but a lot of different types of stories. The relationships just generate a lot of stories that are very different than the slapstick stories. So we're thinking of taking advantage of that. Well, let's not just do shorts, let's try and sell a prime-time series. So we're developing a prime-time series called *The God Damn George Liquor Show*. And that stars George, Jimmy, [and] Jimmy's girlfriend.

How far along are you with that? Is it fully developed?

Oh, it's developed. In fact, this comic book is a great breeding

"We teamed George Liquor and Jimmy and discovered whole new story possibilities. When you have good characters you generate all kinds of stories."

ground for these stories. We've written 10 times as many stories as we need for the comics.

Aren't the Ripping Friends a bunch of big, burly men?

Yeah, but that's not all they are. They're caricatures of the whole superhero genre. They definitely take the law into their own hands because that is their birthright. And nobody can do anything without the Ripping Friends' input. The President calls them for every little emergency ... "I can't satisfy my wife." Ripping Friends slam their fists together! It's Ripping time! Fly to the White House and help the President out.

Are we going to see The Ripping Friends anytime soon?

Oh, I doubt it. The Ripping

Friends are just too manly even for us. They are very hard to draw which is going to make them even harder to animate. If something is hard to draw, it's 10 times harder to animate. We do want to do them, but we want to do them in full animation. We don't want to do them on television.

Do you think that you may try developing them more through the comic books?

As we get more into the comics medium. We don't want to take our hardest characters and start a brand new medium we're going to make a lot of mistakes in. I mean that because we're ignorant in it.

So the comics are going to be a long-term thing then, hopefully?

Well, if people buy the comics. If they don't buy them, we'll be on the streets, laying in a gutter somewhere. ▲

